

A column by Congressman Chet Edwards (808 words)

We are a country of diverse interests, but we share common values and hopes for the future. Among those core values are fairness and hard work. If we put in the hours at work everyday, we expect a fair wage and stable benefits to ensure we can support our families, provide them a good education, and have access to affordable, quality health care.

Health care and the question of reform have been personal concerns to all of us for some time now. We have all heard the stories of family members, friends, or neighbors, most of them middle class families, who work hard, but still struggle because their health insurance premiums have doubled, or because they don't have enough coverage to get the care they need for themselves or their children. Too many have no coverage at all.

The questions many are asking today are -- What works and what does not work in our present health care delivery system? What does reform mean for me? How can we maintain the many positive aspects of our health care system while crafting reforms that add security for those middle class families whose values and strong work ethic represent the very best of our nation? I have not decided how I will vote, but these questions are also on my mind.

One thing is clear. These American stories require uniquely American solutions. Reforming our health care system, which accounts for one-sixth of our national economy, must be done carefully. It cannot be rushed and it cannot be based on health care models from other countries.

As I read the various health care reform bills making their way through Congress, my vote will be guided by fundamental principles: lowering costs, maintaining competition and choice, and preserving quality care. I will strongly oppose any one size fits all single-payer plan that socializes our health care system or prevents people from keeping the quality private health care plan of their choice.

Before receiving my support, any reform plan would have to preserve the many positive aspects of America's health care system. That includes offering a wide range of private health insurance options, ensuring patients choice of doctors, and access to modern, effective technology that enables our health care providers to continue to provide the quality care we have become accustomed to receiving. Most of all, reform must allow people to keep their existing insurance plans if they are happy with them.

These stories of our family members, friends, and neighbors are a constant reminder that the current health care system is financially unsustainable. Fast-rising health care costs are hurting and even bankrupting many middle-income families and small businesses. The cost of insuring a family is growing at nearly four times the rate of wage increases. Under our current health care system, it is estimated that the average Texas family will pay \$24,000 annually for health care by 2016. That would be an astounding 51% of the average Texas family income.

The fact that 46 million Americans, over 18% of our population, lack basic health insurance is a serious problem and one that is growing worse every day. Texas has the highest percentage of uninsured of any state in the nation, with over 25% of Texans lacking health coverage. The large number of uninsured puts a burden on those who do have health insurance, increasing our waiting times in the emergency room, where so many seek care, and driving up the price of health insurance coverage for everyone else. Every Texas family, on average, pays an additional \$1,800 in insurance premiums each year to cover the treatment costs for uninsured Americans. That has to end.

Reform must mean that small businesses and the self-employed such as farmers, ranchers and realtors can have their excessive health insurance premiums reduced. It must help families with spouses or children with serious illnesses or pre-existing conditions get health care at reasonable prices. It must lower prescription drug prices for seniors that are far higher than prices charged in other countries. It must reduce the number of uninsured going to hospital emergency rooms for primary care, which can be ten times more expensive than visiting a family physician.

As the health care debate unfolds, I am committed to listening to the concerns of families, doctors, hospitals, and businesses throughout our district to determine the best solution to the issues facing our health care system. Until then, I will keep an open mind on how I will vote. In Congress and here at home, we must have a healthy and open dialogue based on facts and mutual respect. If we can work together in good faith, my hope is that we can write a new chapter of the American story, one that once again relies on the core middle class values of hard work and fairness to guide the way.

Congressman Edwards represents District 17.

